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In sharing their latest research, professors Andrew Rhyne and Koty Sharp collaborate on coral reef conservation strategies among 2,500 scientists and policy makers

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HONOLULU, Hawaii – Two marine science experts from Roger Williams University joined 2,500 scientists, policy makers and environmental managers from 70 nations this week to share the latest research and devise strategies for conserving and protecting coral reefs around the world at the 13th Annual International Coral Reef Symposium in Honolulu.

Andrew Rhyne, an assistant professor of marine biology at RWU and research scientist at New England Aquarium, will present an original invention and an online database – both developed in partnership with Michael Tlusty of New England Aquarium – and discuss how real-time information on the aquarium trade can help inform policy decisions for more effective fisheries management. With Aquariumtradedata.org, Rhyne and Tlusty have synthesized several years' of tropical fish export invoices for the aquarium trade into an interactive map that allows users to query by species and location for information on export numbers and sources. As a spinoff from that database, the scientists also created a tool that digitizes export invoices and feeds it into an online data system that automatically checks species identity and origin using optical character software to advance the port inspection process and, potentially, curb the illegal wildlife trade.

Koty Sharp, an assistant professor of marine biology, will co-chair a session on symbiosis in corals, as well as lecture about her research – in collaboration with New England Aquarium and the Georgia Institute of Technology – into the microbiome composition of *Astrangia poculata*, a local coral found throughout the western Atlantic Ocean that can provide clues into coral bleaching, which is currently devastating the Great Barrier Reef.

"Coral reef systems occupy a very small percentage of globe surface, but they are among the most biodiverse habitats on the planet – home to more than a quarter of the species in the ocean," says Sharp, who was recently interviewed about her research in the *Christian Science Monitor*. "Economically and culturally, reefs are also very significant to the communities that reside nearby. What we're seeing now, in response to global climate change, is that coral reefs are among the first ecosystems to respond and they're extremely threatened, as we're witnessing with the bleaching crisis in the Great Barrier Reef."

At these global gatherings that take place every four years, Sharp says thousands of coral reef scientists "work together to share our latest research results in order to apply informed decision-making to achieve coral reef sustainability and effective conservation and management."

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